

CAPITOL IDEA

The Commonwealth's seat of government is a remarkable assemblage of historically and architecturally significant structures woven into the enduring landscape of Capitol Square. The focal point of the complex is Thomas Jefferson's Capitol, a work that ranks among the nation's most influential works of architecture. The Capitol signaled the birth of America's Classical Revival movement and established the precedent for using the classical style for public buildings. Surrounding the Capitol is a variety of historic edifices, several of which have received official landmark destination: the Executive Mansion, Old City Hall, the Bell Tower, and Morson's Row among them. Other architectural resources in the complex are the 1939 State Library building, the Finance Building, the Supreme Court of Appeals (the former Federal Reserve Bank), the Ninth Street State Office Building (the former Richmond Hotel), the General Assembly Building, and the Aluminum Building.

The complex serves many functions. First and foremost, it is the tangible embodiment of the history and continuity of Virginia's state government. Next, but no less important, it provides dignified accommodation for the functions of the various branches of state government. The complex also serves as an important tourist destination. Visitors from all over the world, and countless groups of Virginia school children, come to see the Capitol and learn about its history. Finally, the complex is an integral part of the fabric of the city of Richmond, a significant public amenity and an important contributor to the life and economy of the capital city.



Virginia's State Capitol signaled the birth of America's Classical Revival movement

"Because these buildings are cultural treasures," said Kathleen S. Kilpatrick, director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, which helps communities capitalize on the benefits of reusing historic buildings, "the Commonwealth recognizes a special stewardship responsibility to maintain the fabric of the seat of government in first-class condition. Moreover, there is an obvious necessity to keep a working complex functioning efficiently." However, upgrading historic buildings to serve the business of government while preserving their historic integrity is a constant challenge. The buildings must meet the ever-changing demands of technology, security, and access while providing commodious accommodation for their users.

Both the executive and legislative branches are keenly aware of the importance of maintaining the image and functionality of the seat of government despite financial constraints. Secretary of Administration Sandra D. Bowen, in a recent presentation before Virginia Public Buildings Board, stressed the urgent need for upgrades in all the buildings in the Capitol Square complex. “While the Executive Mansion has recently received a highly acclaimed restoration,” Secretary Bowen said, “the same attention is required immediately for the Capitol itself.” The Capitol has not undergone a thorough rehabilitation for more than 40 years. Both the mechanical and communication systems are antiquated and structural problems have been identified. More sophisticated security systems are required as well. Secretary Bowen emphasized that the Commonwealth will attract much attention and many visitors in 2007, the quadricentennial of the Jamestown landing. That date should be the target date for a restored Capitol.

In addition to the Capitol, the Finance Building is also in need of immediate consideration. Located just east of the Capitol on Capitol Square, this handsome neoclassical edifice was erected in 1895 to serve as the Virginia State Library. After housing the library and later the state treasurer, the building has been all but vacant for the past 20 years and currently is in a state of deterioration.



The neoclassical Finance Building

Nevertheless, properly restored, it could provide prestigious accommodation in the heart of the seat of government. Appropriate users first have to be identified and then significant funding will have to be found for a full-scale restoration.

Anticipating the attention required of the Capitol Square complex, the Department of General Services has issued a request for proposals for architects to develop a master plan for the restoration of the Capitol. Included in the project is the 1939 State Library building, a monumental Art Deco structure vacated several years ago with the completion



The Art Deco 1939 State Library

of the new Library of Virginia. The master plan is to establish a program for using the 1939 library building temporarily for the General Assembly and the Governor’s Office while the Capitol undergoes restoration targeted for 2007. The plan will also address the long-term use of the library building. Interviews have been held and a team has been selected. The master plan is to be completed within six weeks from the awarding of the contract, in November 2002. The master plan will concentrate on the Capitol and the 1939 State Library, and will also consider space needs for the whole complex. The Finance Building will be taken into account in this exercise, but developing a plan for its restoration is not part of the project.

Nonetheless, Secretary Bowen recognizes that the Finance Building is an important asset and needs to be given a high-profile role in the workings of state government.

The maintenance of the seat of government is a costly, on-going process. Keeping historic buildings functioning efficiently is often more difficult than replacing them. The Virginia State Capitol is an 18th-century building, the second oldest capitol in the nation. Yet it is a foremost element of Virginia's history and tradition; its continued use as our capitol is not in question. Keeping its ancillary structures intact and in use is more challenging. Despite current state budget conditions, Secretary Bowen and the Virginia Public Buildings Board are committed to giving positive effort to maintaining the entire seat of government's historic and architectural resources.